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SUBJECT: MOROCCO: AMBASSADOR'S MEETING WITH MINISTER OF
STATE LAENSER

¶1. (SBU) Summary: The Ambassador met Minister of State Laenser, the Secretary General of the Popular Movement Party (MP), on January 25. Laenser discussed the need for the King's entourage to devolve powers to the Parliament and the problem of a saturated political environment with too many parties and no party discipline. He maintained that the Party of Authenticity and Modernity (PAM) had no real political platform. However, he conceded that the MP probably would align with the PAM in the 2012 parliamentary elections, as it had in the 2009 local council elections. His position on having three main political blocs in Moroccan politics is a familiar one that Moroccan political pundits suggest is the goal behind the creation of the PAM. The MP by default -- and not because of common ideology or shared programs -- seems to fall into the PAM bloc. On economic issues, he portrayed himself as pro-free market and discussed the challenges to reducing unemployment. End Summary.

¶2. (SBU) Ambassador Kaplan met with Minister of State Mohand Laenser, one of two Ministers of State without portfolio, on January 25 in an introductory call. Laenser, who is also the Secretary General of the Popular Movement (MP), a political party that has traditionally supported Berber interests, thanked the Ambassador for strong U.S. support to Morocco. He stated that as a minister holding various portfolios for over 17 years, he had had the privilege and honor to experience directly the close relationship between the two countries. In friendly and honest discussions, Laenser appeared to give his sincere opinions on political and economic issues in Morocco.

The Political System is Sick

¶3. (SBU) Responding to the Ambassador's question about the political party system in Morocco, Laenser discussed the major problems, from his point of view, facing the system. He first clarified that -- unlike other parties -- the Popular Movement felt that constitutional change was not necessary; instead, there was a problem with the application of the Constitution. The "cement" that the King brings to a tribal society and the strength of his role in the country were essential. The role that his entourage played, however, should go to the Prime Minister and Parliament.

¶4. (U) Laenser opined that the political parties and Parliament were "sick." First, having a governing coalition of five parties, as currently in Morocco, was unwieldy. When the Ambassador asked whether a two-party system like in the U.S. would suit Morocco better, Laenser replied that he envisioned three blocs: leftists, conservatives (PJD and Istiqlal), and centrists. Governing coalitions needed to be made up of two to three parties at most. The next major challenge was a lack of political maturity among parties. He

cited that many Members of Parliament, after their election, only attended the opening session of Parliament that the King inaugurates. He also discussed imposing rules on party members to bring higher standards to political life, such as limiting when members can change parties or punishing absenteeism. He explained that in Belgium and Turkey, for example, when a Member of Parliament wants to switch parties, he must run again for election because he was switching the platform on which he originally was elected. He also lamented that elections were personal rather than party affairs. In other words, a candidate for election that was not chosen by one party could just switch to another and still win the election because of his personal popularity. Laenser argued that reform of the political system could not wait until other challenges such as poverty and illiteracy were addressed but that there must be parallel reform efforts.

Nothing New in the Party of Authenticity and Modernity

¶15. (SBU) In the context of political system reform and the role of political parties, Laenser brought up the Party of Authenticity and Modernity, claiming that it had no real platform besides modernity, which "everyone agrees on." He opined that the PAM stated its intention to bring in new political elites but in the June election, it formed alliances with existing ones. The MP, however, has "no problem with the PAM in principle." As for working with the PAM, Laenser stated that the MP had already aligned with the PAM in the 2009 elections and was likely to repeat this practice in the 2012 parliamentary elections.

Free Trade Beneficial But Unemployment Difficult

¶16. (U) Laenser also brought up economic reform and challenges facing Morocco on several occasions. He claimed that he and the MP have consistently supported free market policies, even going against many dissenting voices on the Free Trade Agreement (FTA) with the U.S. He stated that his position has now been justified by the increase in exports and would continue to be justified by the FTA's long-term benefits. He gave another example from when he was Minister of Agriculture and supported -- again, in the face of much opposition -- the opening of public agricultural lands to sale to the private sector. The Government had a role as regulator of the market and in creating standards but not in interfering in the economy, he explained.

¶17. (U) When the Ambassador asked about unemployment, Laenser replied that unemployment was not limited to youth who have university degrees and cannot find employment but extended to those in rural areas, those in inner cities and middle-aged Moroccans. There were some solutions for unemployed youth, such as credits for hiring youth for projects or to open businesses, or helping young people obtain jobs in companies through temporary exemptions from taxes or social charges. Overall, the biggest contributing factor to unemployment was the education system, which was neither adequate nor did it correspond to supply and demand in the Moroccan economy. He explained that often a job was available but the right candidate was not. To fix this, he suggested, for example, that a student who did not succeed in school should go into vocational training rather than remaining unemployed.

Comment

¶18. (SBU) Laenser appeared to give his unvarnished opinion of the political and economic situations in Morocco to the Ambassador -- even going so far as to state that the king's entourage should delegate power to Parliament. That said, the MP has managed for decades to represent Berber interests

without running afoul of Moroccan laws that explicitly prohibit parties from organizing along ethnic lines -- and one of the keys to that long-running success has been the MP,s devotion to the monarchy. His stance on creating three major political blocs is an opinion expressed by many political analysts here, who suggest that this is exactly what the Makhzen, i.e., the country,s political and economic elite, is trying to force with the formation of the PAM. End Comment.

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